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SUBJECT: FRENCH MFA MID-EAST DIRECTOR ON IRAN, PEACE
PROCESS, SYRIA, LEBANON, IRAQ, KUWAIT

Classified By: Political Counselor Andrew Young, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: MFA Middle East Director (Assistant Secretary equivalent) Patrice Paoli emphasized to WE Office Director Maureen Cormack July 16 the importance of persuading European and USG allies around the world to recognize, and act to prevent, the destabilizing consequences of a nuclear-armed Iran. Paoli expressed strong concern that regional powers outside Europe, North America and the Middle East do not perceive Iran's nuclear program as a serious threat to regional stability and global non-proliferation efforts. Referring to the Iranian ex-patriate community in France, he said that 1,500 Iranian citizens currently study at universities throughout France and approximately 10,000 residents in France are of Iranian extraction, including citizens and non-citizens. Paoli and Desk Officer Arnaud Pescheux, who also attended the meeting, described the changing relationship between the security apparatus and the clergy in Iran as the most important post-election development. They described a "radical re-distribution of political power" from the clerics to the security forces, specifically to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The French believe a rupture at the heart of the IRGC would weaken the regime most significantly. In light of these changes, they said that France plans to intensify its engagement with Iranian civil society and, if necessary, to support the imposition of harsh new sanctions.

¶2. (C/NF) SUMMARY CONTINUED: With regard to Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, the GOF does not support a peace conference for its own sake, Paoli explained; they support any mechanism that will spur and accelerate forward progress. Paoli denied rumors that the French have begun to facilitate Israeli-Syrian dialogue and he related recent comments by Syrian President Bashar Al-Asad to French leaders about Israel, Palestine, Egypt, and sanctions. Paoli also briefly discussed Iraq-Kuwait border negotiations as well as Michel Aoun and Saad Hariri's current approach to forming a new government in Lebanon.

Regional Powers Not Taking Threat from Iran Seriously

¶3. (C) Paoli expressed strong concern that regional powers outside Europe, North America and the Middle East do not perceive Iran's nuclear program as a serious threat to regional stability and global non-proliferation efforts. Recently the French conducted formal conversations with their counterparts worldwide, Paoli reported, including in South Africa, Brazil, India, and Japan. They sought to evaluate perceptions of Iran in official circles. They found, to their disappointment, that officials in most countries do not share our sense of urgency. Even some smaller EU countries, the French discovered, do not consider halting Iran's nuclear program to be a national priority. Paoli stressed the importance of persuading European and USG allies around the

world to recognize, and act to prevent, the destabilizing global consequences of a nuclear-armed Iran.

Approximately 10,000 Iranian Ex-Patriates Living in France

14. (C) Paoli and Iran Desk Officer Arnaud Pescheux, who also attended the meeting, said that 1,500 Iranian citizens currently study at universities throughout France. They estimated that approximately 10,000 residents in France are of Iranian extraction, including citizens and non-citizens. Admitting that the GOF has not tracked the growth of its Iranian population, they said they cannot provide precise numbers. Many residents who arrived following the Iranian Revolution have now integrated fully. Paoli noted that the size and influence of the Iranian immigrant community in France cannot compare with those of the Moroccan and Algerian populations, both of which exceed one million. He added that the Tunisian, Turkish and Portuguese immigrants, among other nationalities, also have a significantly larger presence in France than do the Iranians. Paoli said that MEK leadership is active in France, but the GOF has no intention to work with them. In addition, the Iranian "Royalists" live in Paris. Reza Pahlavi, the eldest son of Shah Mohammed, still hopes to take power, Paoli mused, adding that Pahlavi occasionally holds press conferences "which interest no one except the Iranian government, which denounces them as scandalous."

15. (C) Paoli and Pescheux expressed interest in learning how the USG balances freedom and control when welcoming Iranian students and workers into the country. They inquired as to

PARIS 00000986 002 OF 003

the number of Iranian students currently present in the U.S., and they asked whether we believe to have attained benefits through exchanges with members of Iranian civil society. The French are currently re-examining their approach to Iranian civil society, Paoli said, and they plan to intensify their engagement.

French Analysis of Iran: Mullahs Losing Power to IRGC

16. (C) Pescheux described the changing relationship between the security apparatus and the clergy in Iran as the most important post-election development. "It is now anachronistic to think of Iran as a state led by Mullahs," he said. "It is a police state. The election was a coup d'etat by the security forces, by the IRGC." Paoli agreed, adding that the election formed part of a "radical re-distribution of political power in Iran." Supreme Leader Khomeini's legitimacy is in question now, Paoli said, especially since he never had much religious legitimacy; his power stemmed from his broad political support, which both reformers and hardliners have challenged. Indeed, Paoli argued, "Khomeini and the Iranian regime are currently suffering from the consequences of their own actions and world view: no dialogue, no compromise." Thus, Paoli explained, the French believe a rupture at the heart of the IRGC, "whose leaders control security as well as the economy," would weaken the government most significantly. Right now it seems the regime will last, he said, though it will likely become more paranoid and insular. "We must hold out our hands, ready for dialogue, while keeping in mind that we've been doing this in Europe for ten years now." In the meantime, Paoli added, we (the EU and USG) are moving toward the necessity to impose new sanctions which go "far beyond" petrol.

Peace Process: Anything to Spur Forward Movement

17. (C) With reference to Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, the GOF does not support a peace conference for its own sake, Paoli explained; they support any mechanism that will spur and accelerate forward progress. "How do we operationalize

all the good ideas and investments already made in the peace process?" Obama has taken risks, he asserted, so how do we translate them into action? Paoli said the Saudis recently posed the same question, despite what he described as their typical prudence. Moreover, he claimed that Mitchell has proceeded too cautiously, and that some Arab diplomats described Secretary Clinton's July 15 speech as "a step backwards," although he did not explain the reasons for this alleged perception.

Syria: Peace Process, Lebanon, Iraq and Sanctions

18. (C/NF) Paoli denied rumors that the French have begun to facilitate Israeli-Syrian dialogue. He said that Prime Minister Netanyahu told President Sarkozy he does not want to negotiate with Syria through Turkey; he prefers direct talks, while President Asad has said he prefers indirect talks. Asad recently told Foreign Minister Kouchner that "Fatah is dead," according to Paoli, before dismissing Egypt's handling of Fatah-Hamas negotiations: "Egypt is partial toward Fatah and thus will never broker agreement" between the two groups, Asad reportedly told Kouchner. Asad also claimed to have "no interlocutor" in Israel: "We're ready but Netanyahu is not there and the Palestinians are not ready." Paoli reported that the French continue to press Asad to improve control of Syria's border with Iraq: "(Sarkozy's Chief of Staff) Gueant and Kouchner made their first points with Asad about Iraq," Paoli asserted, referring to their recent visits to Syria and Lebanon. "We've always told Syria to stop interfering in Iraq and to improve their border controls." Asad reportedly replied that the Syrians will now work with Prime Minister Maliki, since he has demonstrated local support in Iraq. Above all else, Paoli said, Asad still seeks international recognition for Syria: "Bashir Asad's dream is a phone call from President Obama." Paoli also claimed that Asad wants the USG to ease restrictions on Syria's ability to import aeronautic technology and parts. (NOTE: Paoli admitted that the French have an interest in this particular sanction, since it affects a pending sale of Airbus planes to Syria, but he said the Syrians have raised it numerous times. Sarkozy's Middle East Advisor Boris Boillon relayed the same information July 5 to the Political-Minister Counselor. END NOTE.)

Lebanon: Hariri, Aoun and Government Formation

PARIS 00000986 003 OF 003

19. (C) Michel Aoun's stubborn approach currently poses the biggest obstacle to the formation of a new government in Lebanon, Paoli argued. Aoun's recent election defeat, his second major electoral loss, still stings, and he is also engaged in an internal debate about the future of his party. Hizbollah, Paoli added, also appear to be debating their future direction and priorities. For his part, Saad Hariri seeks four guarantees, according to Paoli:

- 1 -- No veto for the opposition;
- 2 -- Syria will engage with Palestinian militants in refugee camps in Lebanon;
- 3 -- Syria will agree to de-limit national borders;
- 4 -- The Syria-Lebanon Supervisory Committee established in the Taif Agreement will be disbanded.

Paoli added that Hariri worries about that the Saudis and Syrians might reach agreement without his approval or input.

Iraq - Kuwait Border Dispute

10. (C) Paoli did not delve into specifics about the draft Security Council Resolution regarding the Iraq-Kuwait border dispute, but he said the French believe the P3 should move the text closer to the Kuwaiti position in order to send a

signal of support to Iraq's neighbors in the region. "We don't want these negotiations to become a means for Iraq to pressure or intimidate smaller countries," Paoli said.

PEKALA